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AUTHOR Newman, Anthony S.
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ABSTRACT

Assumptions and conclusions concerning language teaching at the advanced undergraduate level are presented, and suggestions of both general attitudes and practical activities to implement the conclusions are proposed. Although the practical experience and all examples are drawn from the teaching of French, the principles and methods should be adaptable to other languages. The conclusions are as follows: (1) language classes aimed at improving competence and performance should still be a core requirement at the third year level; (2) novel ways need to be devised to remotivate interest in key areas of competence still incompletely assimilated; (3) students need to be offered methods for defining the limits of their competence and for pushing back these limits; (4) methods are needed to develop performance skills through coordinating disparate knowledge, activating passive knowledge, and communication confidence; (5) a course should offer a variety of stimuli and scope for working at level of need, achievement, and interest; (6) a common core might be the analysis of and insistence on a number of these problem areas; and (7) texts need to be devised. (SW)

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LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE ADVANCED UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

Anthony S. Newman
University of New South Wales

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1. Introduction

In this purely practical paper, I propose a set of assumptions about teaching language in the later years of undergraduate study of a foreign language, and the related conclusions one might draw from them. These are followed by a number of suggestions of both general attitudes and practical activities which aim to implement these conclusions, and a note on concocting exercises. Though the practical experience and all examples are drawn from the teaching of French, the principles and methods should be adaptable to other languages.

2.1 Assumptions

1. With rare exceptions, 3rd year undergraduate students continue to exhibit marked limitations in both language competence and performance.
2. After 7 or 8 years of school and university instruction in French language, students feel they have "done it all before".
3. They do have, frequently despite appearances and their own feelings of inadequacy, a considerable store of knowledge.
4. Competence and performance skills vary greatly from student to student. Lacunae are not all common.
5. However, there are definable areas of difficulty and weaknesses for foreign, and more specifically, English-speaking learners of French.
6. There are no satisfactory teaching texts.

2.2 Conclusions

1. Language classes aimed at improving competence and performance should still be a core requirement at 3rd year level.
2. a) Novel ways need to be devised to remotivate interest in key areas of competence still incompletely assimilated.
b) Students need to be offered methods for defining the limits of their competence and for pushing back these limits.
3. Methods are needed to develop performance skills through:
 - coordinating disparate knowledge
 - activating passive knowledge
 - communication confidence
4. A course should offer a variety of stimuli, and scope for working at own level of need, achievement and interest.

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5. A common core might be the analysis of and insistence on a number of these problem areas.

6. We need to devise texts.

3. Practical Suggestions

3.1 General

A course based on these assumptions and conclusions would tend to be a *pot pourri* of stimuli and activities rather than a closely didactic exposition. It should be conducted in the target language except for occasional excursions into comparative questions. The emphasis should be on student activity, through assignments, tutorial papers and varied exercises. Some, at least, of these should involve individuals working at their own level. Correction feedback should be frequent and rapid.

The over-riding aim should be to encourage the development of a consciously critical and self-critical awareness of language as form, an attitude which seems to be the *sine qua non* for continuing to refine one's language skills beyond a certain level of inculcated competence, given a non-foreign-language learning context.

3.2 Activities

3.2.1 Extended

A useful general principle is that of the *mise-en-train* (immediate student activity) whether it be for the whole course or a particular lesson. Begin the course, for example, by having the students do a *compte rendu* of a short read text, or write a few lines in class (5 minutes only) on any subject. While disrupting the passive receptor attitude, this also provides immediate teacher feedback on student levels and students' feedback on their own errors. Each class might start with a participation activity such as a rapid spelling (e.g. interlingual paronyms: *abréviation*, *adresse*, *agressif*, *symétrie*, *trafic*, *littérature*, *personnalité*, ...) or gender test (e.g. *manque*, *espace*, *système*, *thème*, ... which "look" feminine but are masculine; *ange* (m.); *brute*, *victime*, *sentinelle* (f.), etc.), leading to the distribution after several weeks of a check list of these classic bugbears.

The formal teaching and exercise of grammar points is likely to provoke the sort of negative reaction mentioned in Assumption 2. So, if the students do not want to be taught grammar, get them to teach it. Choose a series of formal topics (e.g. the imperfect tense, conditional clauses, the subjunctive, ...) to be presented as individual or (preferably) group *exposés* (tutorial papers). It is advisable to have each group supply a duplicated sheet giving the examples to be discussed. Furthermore, it seems most profitable to get them to summarise very briefly the central issues and to concentrate on illustrating the discoveries they have made. For instance, for the French imperfect, that it is not always a *past* tense ("Si vous veniez demain ..."), a tense at all ("Il a dit qu'il venait"), nor necessarily "continuous" ("A cinq heures, le roi mourait"), can even be a non-event ("Un pas de plus et il tombait")!

Card indexing assignments can provide another discipline that contributes to remotivating interest in questions of grammar and idiom. Students are required, over a term or semester, to note on separate index cards sentences met in their reading of the target language (literary texts, critics, journals, magazines, newspapers etc.) which strike them for any reason (anomalies, queries, striking examples, etc.). An initial conditioning to this activity might be achieved by distributing in class a pile of *Le Monde*, *Paris Match*, *L'Express*. Five minutes of individual perusal usually suffices to produce queries about such things as subjunctives ("il est rare que...", "dans l'espoir qu'il vienne"), agreement ("le président passa devant nous dans une grosse Chevrolet noir et blanc"), or word order ("il roulait sans presque d'essence"). The point of this exercise is that the students are being encouraged to adopt a stance of critical awareness at the boundaries of their competence by a questioning of the performance of native speakers. (Students might well be also encouraged to keep a large margin on their note paper in which to note striking usages and anomalies in their teacher's oral performance! So limited is their average exposure to the target language that they should exploit all opportunities and maximize that exploitation.)

The two-pronged tutorial paper and card-indexing approach can also be used to tackle the area of language errors (Conclusion 2(b)). All teachers know that feeling of futility when marking essays and exercises, at the thought that most of their suggestions and comments will at best be glanced at. I have found it helpful to give as an assignment similar to the last mentioned the task of noting on separate index cards errors made in other courses (literature, civilisation essays, etc.). Students are to copy the error, correct it and try to add any explanatory information about (a) the principle involved and (b) the possible origin of the fault. This latter should ideally lead them to a classifying of the cards which should give each individual a rough typology of his personal areas of weakness. This is the defining of their own limits of competence (cf. Conclusion 2(b)). Moreover, both these card indexing assignments satisfy the condition (Conclusion 4) that scope should be given to students to work at their own level of need and attainment.

In counterpoint with this personal errors assignment, a series of tutorial papers could be given based on "correct usage" articles culled from the daily or weekly press (in French: Jacques Cellard in *Le Monde*, Aristide in the *Figaro littéraire*, Marcel Cohen in *L'Humanité*, etc.). I prepare and distribute a booklet of photocopies of selected articles, which it is the students' task to summarise and elucidate. This complements their own error analysis by moving the perspective to the "errors" and problems the native speakers themselves find worthy of discussion. The essential acquisitions here are often by implication (e.g. "Après que" + indicatif: this old war-horse leads to the conclusion that (a) "après que" is generally avoided and (b) the subjunctive is close to being the spontaneous modern idiom!).

The two sets of tutorial papers (grammar points, *chroniques de langue*) might provide the solid core of what by choice and definition is a disparate, loosely structured course. Another on-going (term- or semester- long) activity could be the writing of a journal by students. This can be a general exercise or selectively aimed at the weaker students. Its benefits can be startling if, and only if, it is a frequent and regular activity with frequent, regular and

copious correction feedback. It is particularly relevant to students who are still trapped in what I think of as the jig-saw puzzle stage (cf. Assum. & Concl. 3), in which they attempt to express themselves in the target language by sticking together, *tant bien que mal*, bits and pieces of isolated, unintegrated knowledge.

It is best to motivate this activity in class by getting students to jot down a few lines on any subject. (This in turn can be prepared by a "Talk for one minute on the subject of, starting from now!" game.) They discover that 5 minutes is all they require to write at least half a page. This then becomes the weekly requirement - one double-spaced page in a small exercise book on any topic under the sun of interest to them. The conditions are that it should reflect their own doings and preoccupations and should be spontaneously jotted down, *not* carefully composed and polished up. In a nutshell, the individual's ideas in the individual's foreign language. This is where the corrections come in, aimed not at punitive criticism, but at copious and constructive suggestions of preferable and alternative terms, phrasings, rephrasings, etc. The importance of this exercise is that it can often be the first time some students have really expressed *themselves* simply and straight-forwardly in the foreign language as distinct from dealing with more or less artificial language situations or literary and philosophical problems which in themselves are conceptually challenging or even alien.

3.2.2 Occasional

Equally varied (Conclusion 4) but more prescriptive might be a range of occasional exercises which would make up the balance of the course (say one or two a week). These would be relatively off-beat exercises, chipping away at the peripheries of the students' competence and constantly coming back to the common core of classic areas of difficulty (Concl. 4). Rather than "off-beat", *oblique* would be more appropriate. On the assumption (No. 3) that key procedures are at least partially or passively known, systematic treatment is to be rejected because of Assumption 2, and instead one should try to reactivate topics by coming at them from new angles.

It is obviously impossible to do more than hint at the variety of possibilities. For instance:

- a) Send them to the dictionary (D.F.C., Petit Robert) to find as many nouns as possible distinguished by gender (guide, *mémoire*, *poêle*, *moule*, etc.).
- b) List sentences whose ambiguity needs to be discussed and explained:
 - Jean a permis à sa soeur d'emporter ses disques.
 - On vous l'a bien expliqué.
 - Elle est toujours en train de téléphoner.
(But why is "Elle n'a pas toujours fait ses devoirs"
not ambiguous?)
 - Je ne suis pas venu parce que vous étiez malade.

- c) Sets of "faux amis", leading for instance to the conclusion that the relationships of meaning and usage are not direct:

<u>Français</u>	<u>Anglais</u>
passable	passable
praticable	practicable
faisable	feasible
possible	possible
eventuel	eventual
final	final
définitif	definite
catégorique	fair

- d) A brain-teaser like the following in which the students are required to mark the acceptable (grammatical) tense combinations:

"Jean pleure aussitôt que Marie boit"

		aussitôt que Marie							
		boit	buvait	boira	boirait	a bu	avait bu	aura bu	aurait bu
Jean	pleure								
	pleurait								
	pleurera								
	pleurerait								
	a pleuré								
	avait pleuré								
	aura pleuré								
	aurait pleuré								

This exercise can be extended by investigating the greater restrictions imposed by "Jean pleure pendant que Marie boit" and the re-found scope due to the aspectual ambiguity of "être" verbs in "Jean pleure pendant que Marie sort".

3.3 Concocting Exercises

Those last two examples were unashamedly stolen and adapted from J.O. Grandjouan (*Les linguisticides*) and Maurice Gross (*Grammaire transformationnelle due français*). That is half the answer to the question: How does one concoct "off-beat" exercises? The other half is: introspection.

The first technique is the magpie's. But my contention is that at this level, the best source is not the teaching manual with its neatly structured exercises, but the learned article or native-speaker book on language or linguistics. Cull, for instance, the examples from an article on a point of transformational grammar, and, ignoring the theory, throw them at the students as (a) examples of idioms, (b) problems of sorting the acceptable from the ungrammatical, (c) shadings of meaning to define, (d) problems to solve.

The second technique is based on joyous humility. Teach them the things you had (have?) difficulty with (gender, spelling; "j'étais"?/"j' ai été ravi de recevoir votre lettre"). Show the scars on your own linguistic pride (pontificating to French friends - "Il y a beaucoup de* mammelles en Australie". Rires!). It is worth more than a laugh to tell them of that embarrassing, so well-intentioned solecism, gazing at the lights of la place de la Concorde: "Comme c'est* belle". Or, the ultimate in Parisian springtime romance, as, arm around her waist, Notre Dame towering against the twilight sky, a bateau mouche passing on the dark waters, I murmur, careful of agreement: "Que la rivière est belle!" and receive the sharp reply: "Ce n'est pas une rivière, c'est un fleuve!"